

# "After Much Prayerful Consideration. . ."

The Interrelation of Sanctified Reason and God's Will in Deliberating a Divine Call

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## **Introduction**

"Is the length of our lives fixed and determined by God or is it influenced by decisions we make in the course of our lives?" Each year this sparks some rather lively debate in middler dogmatics. Of course, our final answer after we study the Scriptures is: "Yes!" In the end, we follow what becomes the familiar biblical (and Lutheran) middle road and let two truths of Scripture stand that are an offensive paradox to our natural human reason. How important that we do so! Emphasizing that God has entrusted to us the responsibility to make wise decisions about our health and general well-being keeps us from carelessly leaping off temple pinnacles. And reminding ourselves that "all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (Psalm 139:16) preserves us from being paralyzed by fear as we consider which recent study about what is harmful to our health (trumpeted on the evening news) will prove to be correct this time. God assures us that we live our lives under his protective and providing hand, but he also calls us to the privilege of using the brain he has given us.

Are we not confronted by that same familiar challenge as we come to the topic that is the subject of this paper? By God's own wise design there are two things at work as we deliberate divine calls. Yes, in the process of deliberation, God promises that his good and gracious will is at work for the sake of his Church—both for his sheep and their shepherds. Yet at the same time, God has also equipped his public ministers with the privilege of exercising sanctified reason in coming to a decision between two equally good and valid divine calls. The challenge, of course, is grasping what part in the process God's will and our use of reason play, without denying or distorting the participation of either of these. And perhaps even a greater challenge is being willing humbly to admit that, this side of heaven, we will never fully understand how those two factors work together in every divine call. Yet despite much that remains beyond us, this we can know: under the guidance of his good and gracious will, God answers our fervent prayers for wisdom and blesses the use of our sanctified reason. Therefore we can in confidence choose between good and good-knowing that God will prosper our decision for the advance of his gospel.

## **Framing the Discussion and Defining the Question**

This essay will assume that the two (or more) calls with which we are wrestling are both valid and legitimate divine calls. Otherwise, there is no deliberation necessary. A call is *valid* when it is issued by those who possess the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Only those who possess those keys can call others to be their and Christ's representatives in using those keys (see Fritz, 1932, p 24, and Schuetze and Habeck, p 24). A call is *legitimate* when there is no open deception or dishonesty in the sending and receiving of the call. To use a familiar phrase, no one on either side of the calling equation has "pulled strings" to manipulate the process (see Fritz, 1932, p 37). Every such valid and legitimate call is a divine call since the Lord of the church is at work through his children to whom he has entrusted the use of the keys.

The purpose of this paper then is not to determine when a call is valid or legitimate. The specific question is: when a pastor, teacher, or staff minister deliberates and then reports the result of his/her deliberation, what is proper to say in the letter that reports that decision? Is it proper to say, "The Holy Spirit has led me to accept this call" or "I have determined that it is God's will that I decline your call and continue to serve in..."? Does making such or similar statements border or even cross into "enthusiasm" that expects/claims the direct communication of the Holy Spirit apart from the means of grace? Or would a refusal to make any

such statements reveal a lack of understanding that God himself does care for and guide the affairs of his church? May certain statements be claiming to know with certainty more than a Christian can know in this life? Or does refusing to make such statements stem from a failure to grasp God's intimate interest and involvement in our lives in general, and in the work of his church in particular?

### **God's Good and Gracious Will Is Clearly at Work in the Calling Process**

Perhaps we are beginning with a statement that is so obvious that it hardly bears repeating, but God is always effectively at work everywhere in his world, even in the midst of the choices and decisions God allows sinful man to make. Of course, at times he completely overrules directly (miracle) or indirectly (police) what sinful men have set their mind to do. Quickly instances such as Pharaoh at the Red Sea come to mind. He said, "I will pursue, I will overtake them. I will divide the spoils" (Exodus 15:9). The Lord said, "He will sink like a rock to the depth of the sea!" God still knows how to get the last laugh (Psalm 2) as sinful human beings vainly seek to overthrow his Anointed One from his throne. It will always be true that "our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him" (Psalm 115:3).

Often, however, we know that God allows sinful human beings to accomplish their wicked plans. Yet, even then, God always directs the result of their choices so that it is, in the end, his plans and purposes that prevail, not theirs. The Christians in Jerusalem had it right when they prayed, "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (Acts 4:27-28). While the life, death and resurrection of Christ is clearly the pinnacle of God's will as he accomplishes his plan of salvation, Romans 8:28-39 assures us that God's gracious will works in all things.

Even when it comes to what appear to be morally neutral actions of sinful man, God's will is still intimately involved. That makes Solomon bold to say by inspiration, "In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps" (Proverbs 16:9). Consider with what boldness Paul was able to say even to the pagan Athenians, "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live..... For in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:26, 28).

If God's will is so intimately at work in the midst of every detail even in the pagan world, how much more confidence can we have that this is true among those whom he calls the apple of his eye—his children—his bride, the Church. As pictured so powerfully by Jesus to John in Revelation 1, we have no reason to doubt that our Lord still walks among the lampstands and still holds the stars in his right hand. If God in his good and gracious will directs the "times" and "places" of unbelieving nations and peoples, how much more should we not expect and trust that he is at work in his church in the same wondrous ways according to his good and gracious will. In particular, in a matter so important as where his public ministers serve him and his people, God clearly will not fail to guide and direct that with his will. That is why Paul can say with confidence, even about those who received "only" a mediate call into the public ministry, that they are serving a particular flock at a particular time because "the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" (Acts 20:28).

All of which gives us great confidence in the midst of the calling process. Luther, when writing to the people of Bohemia about calling their own pastors, encouraged them in the process by declaring: "It is God who works in you to will and to do according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13) (Luther, p 40). If that is indeed true for every fruit of faith flowing from a believing heart, calling and deliberating a call would seem to be no exception. Your district president, in a PowerPoint presentation shared with congregations going through the call process, is absolutely correct to assure them that "God the Holy Spirit is involved in answer to your prayers and in love for his Church." That is neither baseless "enthusiasm" nor empty piety. It is solidly biblical encouragement since the Lion of the tribe of Judah has indeed conquered and holds every detail of the scroll of world history in his marked hands (Revelation 5).

But that doesn't mean there aren't cautions to speak lest we say more than we know. It is still true that much remains hidden from us apart from what the Spirit has given us to know specifically about God's will in

and through the means of grace. It will never be passé to say with Paul, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" (Romans 11:33-34). We often must be reminded with the first disciples, in answer to their curious questions for more detailed information, "It is not for you to know the times and dates the Father has set by his own authority" (Acts 1:7). And while Jesus was specifically talking to them about eschatological realities, embedded there is a principle that delineates a line beyond which we cannot go. "We can say nothing with certainty about the will of God apart from the revealed Word of God" (Deutschlander, p 3).

Specifically, while God's good and gracious will has certainly not suddenly ceased to operate in his church when we are wrestling with a call, yet God has not promised that his Spirit will whisper the "right" answer into our ears if we obediently listen. He has not promised that somehow we will be able to soar into the secret counsels of God and return home with God's own decision in hand. It is still true that it is the mark of a "wicked and adulterous generation" that seeks after "a sign" (Matthew 16:4). Here too, we who live under the cross walk by faith and not by sight.

Perhaps what has often given the pastor or other called workers the longing to be able to unscrew the inscrutable is the feeling that there is only one possible "right" answer and God expects his servant to discern it. If that were so, it would almost be cruel if God did not whisper that answer in our ear so that we would not be troubled in our conscience that we may be making the wrong decision.

It would also be fair to say that it isn't just the enthusiastic tendency of particular called workers that may have planted this thought. There is some confusion (or at least some lack of clarity) in Lutheran pastoral theology texts from which called workers may have imbibed such thinking. Fritz, in his *Pastoral Theology*, long a staple at LCMS seminaries (and not unknown at our own), gives the clear impression that a pastor must seek to determine whether a call is divine, and then, if he has determined that it is, he is duty-bound to God to obey that call and accept it. "Even as it is sinful to accept a call that is not valid and not legitimate, so it is likewise sinful for a pastor not to accept a call if he is convinced that God is calling him, Jer. 1, 4-10; Ex. 4,10-17; 2 Cor. 2,16.... If one has made sure that God is calling him, he dare not let his own unwillingness and the feeling of his own insufficiency stand in the way lest he provoke God's displeasure" (p 41).

Notice that Fritz is not talking about whether a call is valid or legitimate. He has already assumed that. But somehow among the valid and legitimate calls it seems to be implied that there are calls in which God is calling someone and calls in which he is not. What is more, it becomes a matter of displeasing God if the one called fails to recognize that God is calling and does not accept such a call. The call form, in use in the LCMS at the time, seems to make that same distinction. "We pray God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to convince our pastor-elect by His Holy Spirit that the call which we herewith extend to him is a divine call." If the decision when we hold two calls is always one between obedience to God and disobedience (sin!), then we could understand a longing for some kind of direct communication.

It may also be worth noting that Fritz's first two "proof" passages are for the immediate calls of Jeremiah and Moses. To draw a principle for those wrestling with mediate calls from passages speaking of calls coming immediately from God is biblical interpretation that leaves much to be desired. But before we cast too many stones in Fritz's direction, perhaps it would be worth noting that our own *Shepherd Under Christ* could be a bit clearer as well. While rejecting the concept that one call is divine while the other is not (p 35), there is a statement that could certainly be clearer: "He [the pastor] will earnestly pray God to guide him in his deliberation and to lead him to a decision that accords with the Lord's will" (p 36). The implication of this statement could be that there is a decision that fits with God's will and one that does not. If that is so, some might conclude, we must make sure we know with certainty which call is in accord with God's will and which is not. Assuming for the moment that there even were a "right" and a "wrong" answer, how could we know that?

How much better it is to assure those wrestling under the strain of two divine calls that there is no right or wrong answer *per se*. There are certainly impure *motives* for accepting or declining that Scripture would teach us, but, in regard to the calls themselves, the called worker is wrestling with two "goods." God has not

handed him a riddle with only one possible correct answer—an error in which might cause him peril to his own soul—all the while withholding the key to resolution.

But is there any biblical example of such choices among two "goods" when a called servant is wrestling with the question of where he/she will serve God? First of all, realize that in all those things in which God has not spoken in Scripture a clear "right" or "wrong" in the midst of specific decisions in life, there is great freedom he has given us. Also, we will not be able to find exact parallels in Scripture to our calling procedure—that too is an adiaphoron. When it comes to how mediate calls to public ministry are handled, Scripture gives very few examples and mandates no particular system.

However, there are at least two interesting examples of which to take note. In 1 Corinthians 16:12 Paul writes from Ephesus, "Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers. He was quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity." There is certainly much about the specifics of this situation that would be fascinating to know. Was it fruitful ministry in Ephesus that Apollos was convinced he needed to attend to "now" so that going to minister in Corinth would be best "later"? We don't know exactly. But this much is clear: the Apostle Paul was convinced ("strongly urged") that it would be wise for Apollos to go to Corinth "now" rather than "later." Yet when Apollos chose to wait to later, we hear no accusation that Apollos had set himself against God's will. Apollos, at least for a time, had "declined" a call that Paul had urged him to "accept," and they remained co-workers serving according to the Lord's will through it all.

Consider also Paul's words about his own ministry "times" and "places" that he reveals to us in 2 Corinthians 1:23-2:1: "I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm. So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you." Yes, Paul was called immediately by Christ to be his apostle and missionary to the Gentiles. And yes, there were times when God also gave to his immediately called apostle "immediate" ministry direction as far as "times" and "places" for him to carry out that work. But that was not always the case. Paul gives no indication that he received a whisper from heaven when he decided to continue a bit longer in ministering in Ephesus rather than making another "painful visit" to Corinth. He "declined" the call some in Corinth might have wished he accepted, as he "made up his mind" to give the law and gospel of his letter(s) a longer time to work. Paul also gives no indication that the opposite choice would have been sinful. He simply was working with what seemed to be the wiser course of action at the time.

As God's public servants learn better to trust that God has not placed before them a choice of "good" and "bad," but a choice of "good" and "good," then the temptation to crave a "sign from heaven" is lessened. We learn to make a decision in faith, not fear, trusting that the Lord can bless whatever decision is made. While fully trusting that God's will is at work, we also learn to put into practice this encouragement of the book of Proverbs: "Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and your plans will succeed" (Proverbs 16:3).

### **God Has Also Given Room for Sanctified Reason to Be at Work in the Calling Process**

Really, as soon as we began to talk about a decision between good and good without direct revelation from heaven, we had already transitioned to a realm in which God calls us to use his gift of reason. The gift of reason was the tool by which perfect creatures, created in the image of God, were enabled to draw accurate conclusions about their lives and the world in which God had placed them. To put it another way, reason, guided by the gift of the image of God, enabled perfect human beings to think God's thoughts after him. Recall how God didn't tell Adam directly that it wasn't good for Adam to be alone. He simply paraded all the animals before Adam for him to name knowing full well that what God already knew to be true would soon enough occur to Adam's reason. Doesn't such a good use of the gift of reason help explain Adam's poetic delight when the need is filled by the creation of Eve? Adam's own perfect reason both understood the need and spoke the "Amen" when he received from God's hand the perfect complement that he was lacking.

And despite the utter loss of the image in the fall into sin, human nature did not lose its faculty of reason. Reason certainly has become dead to anything good in the spiritual realm as Scripture (Ephesians 2:1) and our Confessions attest (Augsburg Confession XVIII, for example). Reason is bound to draw nothing but false conclusions about God's apparent lack of justice or love when observing the visible world (see Psalm 73 for how strong that misguided pull of reason is even for the believer!). Yet, even in the unbeliever, reason can still know that it is probably wise on most mornings to eat oatmeal rather than bacon when struggling with high cholesterol.

In the believer, God's image has been restored in his new man. In the realm of justification, that image had been restored by God's declaration (Romans 5:19). And in the realm of sanctification, by the power of the Spirit in the gospel, the believer strives day by day to put that restored image ever more beautifully into practice in heart, word, and life (Ephesians 4:22-24). This restoration of the image in the believer's new self also yields a reason that works from the base of faith in Christ. Once again, the believer possesses real freedom as reason makes many decisions every day that enable the believer to do "all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). Such sanctified reason, which rejoices in Christ, becomes an even more valuable tool than the hollow and often deceptive shell of itself that it was in the unbelieving heart.

And God assumes that man will use the gift of reason he has been given. Just as it is true that "ears that hear and eyes that see—the LORD has made them both" (Proverbs 20:12), so God has made minds to think—reason to function. Where God has not given us the inspired direction of his Word, in other words, in the myriad daily choices between one good and another, God has given the freedom to make decisions to our sanctified reason. The Christian makes those decisions, all the while trusting that God will bless such decisions that he has given to us.

Which is precisely why, when we struggle with two valid and legitimate divine calls, both of which involve a good place to serve our God, reason is indeed in an arena in which God has called it to function.

And there is much work to do for our reason in the calling process. The question is not, as we wrestle with two calls, who is and who is not fit for ministry. While Scripture certainly settles that question (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, and elsewhere), our eligibility for a call has already been decided by the fact that we have a call and that another has been directed to us. The question that is before us as we deliberate a call is this: am I fit for this particular place, with its particular needs, with my particular gifts (and weaknesses) that God has given me to serve him? "He will base his decision on his answer to this question: Where can I with my gifts best serve the interests of God's kingdom?" (Brenner, p 10)

Yes, Scripture does give us significant help. Scripture warns us about the danger of pride of position (Mark 10:41ff) and a love for dishonest gain (1 Peter 5:2), among other ministry pitfalls. Scripture also supplies us with the key question itself, telling us that "there are different kinds of gifts" and that "to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:4, 7). Such words of Paul encourage us to understand that not everyone fit for the public ministry in general is fit for every specific position of the public ministry.<sup>1</sup>

But as I wrestle with the answer to the question supplied by Scripture, and guard against the ministry abuses about which Scripture warns me, I am very much to make use of my God-given reason as I consider: where is the best ministry fit at this time in my service to Christ and his people?

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<sup>1</sup> Please remember that this paper's focus is on a called worker deliberating two divine calls. This paper does not mean to imply that a called worker, without another call, never needs to seriously and prayerfully consider whether his time of profitable service to the gospel at a particular place may have reached its end. Granted, on his own, a called worker should be *very slow* to draw such a conclusion for at least two reasons. First, our sinful hearts can fool us so easily. Second, so many of the fruits of what God accomplishes through gospel ministry are hidden from our eyes this side of heaven. We may draw the conclusion that our ministry is foundering when what God is seeking to accomplish is flourishing. However, when someone is wondering if he continues to be a good fit for a particular place of service, the advice and counsel of those called to positions of advisory authority in the synod (circuit pastors, district presidium) can prove especially valuable. Their sanctified reason and counsel at such times offer some more objective assistance in determining whether his continued service in that place will prove a blessing to God's kingdom. Here too human reason is not "meddling" with a divine call. Rather, human reason is serving a purpose for which God has given it.

And reason has many resources at its beck and call. Reason makes use of objective data from both places of ministry. What appear to be the ministry needs and the ministry resources available to meet those needs? Are there ministry needs and resources that appear to be untapped and waiting to be harnessed into the work of the kingdom?

But reason also does not need to go it alone with the analytic power of just one brain—in fact it is foolish to do so. God has not only created our personal mind and all its abilities and reasoning faculties. God has surrounded us with brothers and sisters in Christ, at both calling bodies and beyond, whose minds and all their abilities can be called to our side. "The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice" (Proverbs 12:15). If I believe that all knowledge needed to make the wisest decision resides in my own cranium, I prove myself to be—and actually become—a fool. Again, Solomon reminds us, "Make plans by seeking advice; if you wage war, obtain guidance" (Proverbs 20:18). If advice is wise for waging earthly war, what does that say about advice for those charged with the protection of souls in a warfare waged with eternal results? How invaluable another's perhaps more objective insights on our gifts and weaknesses may be. How crucial the insights of brothers and sisters on the needs of both places of ministry—needs and challenges and resources and opportunities to which we may be blind or short-sighted.

In fact, not only is the use of reason wise in deliberating a call, we can state that to refuse to make use of the gift of reason is in fact a disobedient testing of God! Just as much as we are tempting God when we neglect his appointed means of grace in matters of growth and preservation of faith, so in areas in which God has given us the use of our reason for reaching decisions, we are tempting him when we neglect those means! Listen as Siegbert Becker gives his insights, combined with the insights of Luther:

Not to use reason in the sphere where God intended that it should be used is to tempt God. There is no need to jump out of a window if there is a ladder available, nor does it make sense to walk though the Elbe when there is a bridge across the river. [Luther] writes in that connection, "Nevertheless, God must not be tempted, that is, the means must not be neglected. But we must use the means which we are able to use, inasmuch as God has not given reason and the counsel and aid of reason that you should despise them." Thus it was perfectly proper for Abraham to go to Egypt during the famine even though he had no specific command of God to do this...." It is true that it is the will of God that all our works should be done in faith, but nevertheless it is not his will that we should neglect what lies at hand and he has previously given" (p 76-77).

Or listen also to Francis Pieper in Volume I of *Christian Dogmatics*.

The following rule of life must be observed: We should in all our ways, in the Kingdom of Power and of Grace, diligently make use of the means which God supplies. In sickness, for example, we call in the doctor and the nurse; and in seeking salvation we make use of the means of grace, through which God creates and sustains faith. It is a foolish undertaking to attempt to penetrate the divine providence *a priori* while setting aside the God-appointed means. We would be entering a domain which is beyond the reach of our present understanding. Shall the creature make bold to explore God in his bare majesty (Luther: '*nuda maiestas*')? (p 493)

### **So Where Does That Leave Us? Practical Implications for Deliberating a Call at the Intersection of God's Will and Human Reason**

We begin where it is wise for all called workers to begin as soon as the phone is put down after receiving the call. As the worker remembers to start breathing again, it is fitting to begin with what has been called "the Christian's vital breath." Praying for wisdom is a barometer that measures how well we are balancing the twin factors of God's will and human reason in the deliberation of a divine call. We pray because we know that God's eager desire in all of this is that his name be hallowed, his kingdom come, and his will be done. We pray because we don't want to do anything in this process that will stand in the way of God's will. Prayer asks

God by the power of his grace in Christ to bend our hearts and lives day by day ever more into conformity with his will—also in this process of deliberating and deciding on a call. But prayer also impacts the use of our human reason. We know that our human reason cannot find true wisdom apart from God's blessing. So we run to him who promises to give wisdom generously to those who lack it "without finding fault" (James 1:5).

Secondly, in faith we will want to keep our grasp tightly on the fact that we have before us the choice of good and good. What a powerful help that is to guard against the fear that leads us to wish we could unscrew the inscrutable! We have no need to burst into the throne room of God and demand that he give us the "right" answer. We don't have to wonder if God could bless us whether the decision, made in trust in his Fatherly providence, is to accept or decline a particular call. For Jesus' sake he could bless us and make us a blessing in either place. And, we know that, once the decision has been made in faith, he will do precisely that.

All of that is true because our Abba (Father) has allowed us for a time to hold two truly divine calls. Sainted Professor Paul Eickmann once said to me in the midst of one such deliberation: "Rich, you are staring at two beautiful apples God has laid before you. One day soon, you are going to reach out your hand and take hold of one of those apples, and, by God's grace, enjoy it!" I'm convinced that Paul of Watertown learned that from Paul of Tarsus. To the Thessalonians Paul spoke with that same assurance when he wrote that God "by his power [can] fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith" (2 Thessalonians 1:11).

Third, even as you know God's will is operating in wondrous ways for the sake of his church—you included—begin to gather all the pertinent information you can. Pull out your synod statistical reports mailed to us every year and see what insights can be gained there. What patterns will you find that reveal ministry opportunities, challenges, blessings? Consult with brothers and sisters in both places—and with trusted colleagues in ministry. When done in faith, it is not a sign of a lack of trust in the Holy Spirit or the divinity of the call to gather information—even to gather much of it. In fact, such gathering of information is a vigorous acknowledgment that God in his wisdom has given us our reason to use wisely. Similarly, to seek the help of others need not in any way be the kind of sinful trust in flesh and blood that dishonors God. Rather it acknowledges that he has given us brothers and sisters in Christ whose wisdom and insights on the information available can help us make an informed decision. It may sound counter-intuitive to a false piety we ourselves may often have spouted, but we tempt God and "get in the Spirit's way" not by gathering information, but by refusing to do so.

Fourth, it is especially important to keep a biblical balance (trusting confidence that God will accomplish his good and gracious will, faith-born use of the gift of reason) as you report the final result of your deliberations. ("Ah, we've finally come to the specific question we asked," you sigh!) Yes, it is fitting and right that we should express Spirit-given confidence that God is accomplishing the best results for his good and gracious will in the whole process. That is true even though what was visible to the physical eye was not much more than human reason wrestling with information and choices along the way. Again, let's call wise Solomon to give us a couple of inspired proverbs. "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails" (Proverbs 19:21). And again, "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases" (Proverbs 21:1). We have not pushed God's will to the sidelines by making use of his gift of reason. Rather, we have used our reason for precisely the kinds of purposes for which he designed that gift.

Yet at the same time that it is perfectly right to speak about God's good and gracious will at work in the whole process of deliberating a call, we easily do God's people a disservice if we do not openly speak at the same time of the sanctified use of reason that was involved in the process. Our letters of accepting or declining a call are a powerful teaching opportunity. Mentioning the wise and faithful use of sanctified reason may be especially important in our postmodern age in which mystic spirituality is "in." If we allow the impression to exist that we have divined the "right" answer by gazing into our own personal version of Joseph Smith's seer stones, we may indeed be fueling "enthusiastic" dreams. And remember, God's people under our care have many similar decisions to make in their own lives between what is good and good (job changes, schools to attend, houses to buy or sell, whom to marry). If we give the impression that God may whisper into their ears his hidden will as he appears to have done into ours, then we have done them a great disservice. We are in

danger of robbing them of a good conscience that in prayer and trust makes use of the same sanctified reason in day-to-day living as we used in deliberating. As God's people listen and watch, we are not just deliberating on a call and reporting on the process. We are watching "our life and doctrine closely" (1 Timothy 4:16) because we are always, in one way or another, teaching eternally impressionable souls.

So, while there may be nothing wrong with saying that "God has led you to decline/accept that call" as every one of our commonly used call forms almost invites us to say, I would urge us not to use that statement in bare form. Don't allow any idea to exist that somehow you did fight your way into heaven to receive the "right" answer from God's own lips. Instead, report that this decision was one that you *made* after much prayer, and after considering the needs of both places, and after seeking the wise counsel of brothers and sisters in Christ at both places.<sup>2</sup>

But may I hasten to add, that God has also not revealed directly from heaven one "right" template for such letters? We are dealing with an area of Christian wisdom in which we may not all express ourselves in precisely the same way. It is unloving to jump to the conclusion that faith-killing heresy is behind every phrase that is different from how we would have worded it. The Eighth Commandment also applies as we read the letters that other called workers write. Christian love urges us to take our brothers' and sisters' words in the kindest possible light. We must not immediately jump to the conclusion that an otherwise orthodox co-worker has suddenly become a flaming enthusiast ("will of God revealed today - tongue speaking tomorrow!"). The only "slippery slope" that may exist is the one I am on that makes it ever easier to judge with unbrotherly harshness the words and actions of my fellow servants of the gospel. There certainly is a place for humbly asking about the wisdom of some particular turns of phrase, but Satan knows that it is not a great distance from such genuine concern to proud "quarreling about words" (2 Timothy 2:14).

Where I would suggest a brotherly expression of concern is when someone makes the even stronger statement, "I am convinced that it is God's will that I . . ." Such statements seem to lead to problems in at least three directions. First, the whole concept that you were struggling between two "goods" is easily lost. If we state that one decision is clearly "God's will" that very easily leaves the impression that the other decision was against God's will. Second, consider what that says to those whose sanctified reason urged you toward the opposite conclusion? Were they setting themselves against the will of God by counseling you in that direction? Were those who were convinced a different decision would have been better disobedient to God? Third, if you should accept a call that is similar to one you recently declined, you are in danger of making God (not to mention yourself) look quite capricious.

There is no perfect format for a letter that accepts or declines a call that fits for each and every circumstance. As mentioned above, we are typically talking about what statements may be wiser than others. It is not necessarily a matter of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. We will try to keep a balance between the guidance of God's will and the use of reason which that same will of God has given to us.

Allow me some quick related encouragements, if I may make use of this essay as a "bully pulpit." It may be wise for the COP to ask their doctrinal committee and/or its designees to examine all our call documents (sample letters, diplomas of vocation) to identify where those documents may at times contribute directly to any confusion that does exist among us. It is my impression that our call documents speak of God's will at work in rather "bare" statements. There is little or no clear indication of the use of sanctified reason by which God is also operating according to his good and gracious will for our lives.

Perhaps it is also time to study whether our skittishness about supplying more information to calling bodies (especially for pastoral calls) may also reflect the very same concerns we notice as called workers accept or decline calls. If we lean toward the side of almost blind trust for congregations (hinting that desires for more information can hardly be anything but distrust in the Holy Spirit and our synodical leaders) should it surprise us if pastors who respond to such calls tend to speak in almost mystical terms in return? If it is not wrong for

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<sup>2</sup> In discussing this paper with another called worker, that worker perceptively commented that another reason for downplaying that the decision was ours may be to deflect some of the disappointment God's people feel. When a worker seems to be "abandoning" people he loves and who love him, is there some subtle "blaming of God" going on to avoid some of the hurt?



our ministerial education schools with their specialized calls to ask for and receive significantly more information in the calling process, is it wrong for congregations to ask for and receive such information as well? Perhaps it would also do us well to remember that in the rapid changes in the culture all around us, the specific ministry challenges of many congregations may make those calls every bit as specialized as any call to teach Hebrew or Greek at MLC.

Yes, in determining what information would be wise to share, those with an extra measure of sanctified common sense would need to think carefully about what would be wise and what may not be wise to share. But can we really express concern about "enthusiastic" speech on one end of the calling process while almost encouraging such a view on the other?

### **In All This There Is Much That Remains Beyond Our Explanation**

How exactly and to what degree does God guide the process as human reason exercises its God-given duties? The artful dance that God has designed between human reason and his good and gracious will is something which we trust more than we can describe. And yes, my wording in the previous sentence stumbles a bit because it is already God's good and gracious will to allow our sanctified reason to play a part in things as wonderful as where a called worker will serve his gospel ministry.

At times, Scripture gives us some hints of what things God may be doing. Think of what the prophet Micaiah (1 Kings 22) revealed about how the LORD allowed lying spirits in the mouths of Ahab's false prophets to guide Ahab's own decision that led to his doom. Without losing the concept that in deliberating calls we are still dealing with good and good, could not God also use the compelling wisdom of a brother or sister in Christ strongly to direct us to accepting or declining a call? God may do that because he has some particular blessings he longs to pour out on shepherd and sheep through our ministry in a particular place at a particular time. While *it is not our business to see and know that*, what we see in 1 Kings 22 may be a bit of a "peek behind the veil" into God's wondrous workings—a peek that God himself gives us.

Because so much of this is way beyond our full understanding, we must also be cautious that we do not exalt our use of reason to a point of pride and false confidence. After consulting with many others and lining up the pros and cons, and finally, prayerfully, making our decision, we must be aware that God may have allowed that decision to be made—and blessed—for many more reasons than we ever saw or grasped. Much as God often surprises husband and wife with aspects of their relationship for their blessing that they never saw as they dated and evaluated their "compatibility," so God can show us new wonders and challenges of why we continue to serve where we do, or why we accepted the call we did. Of course, we may be in heaven before we get that perfect *a posteriori* view of what was all behind that call that was accepted or declined. With Moses, we still only get to glimpse God's glory from behind after he has passed by (Exodus 33).

I'm convinced Solomon has one more inspired Word of wisdom that helps us here: "A man's steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way?" (Proverbs 20:24). That truth of how much is way beyond us in all of this (and thank God it is!) seems also to stand behind this statement by Forrest Bivens: "Wisdom and prudence, blended with a prayerful humility as we approach the task of calling public servants, will never go out of style" (p 5). While Professor Bivens had the congregation's end of the process specifically in mind as he wrote those words, they apply equally well to our end as the worker receiving, deliberating, and answering that call. The words of still another wise man resonate here as well. They are the inspired words of David:

My heart is not proud, O LORD,  
my eyes are not haughty;  
I do not concern myself with great matters  
or things too wonderful for me.  
But I have stilled and quieted my soul;  
like a weaned child with its mother,

like a weaned child is my soul within me (Psalm 131:1-2).

### **Conclusion**

I have a letter that I have carried in my pocket calendar for more than 15 years. It is a letter my wife wrote to me as I was about to return yet another call while serving in Oklahoma. Her loving and wise words stopped me in my tracks when I thought a decision was ready to be announced. In fact, the opposite decision, to accept the call to a parish in Wisconsin, was the final result. I have no doubt my Lord Jesus has blessed that decision in more ways than I will ever know this side of heaven. I also know that he would have blessed the decision if it had been to stay—such an outcome would not have been evil. But the Lord of the Church has seen fit in his good and gracious will to work with a human decision—made in consultation with many others, and influenced greatly by my wife's wise words—to advance the cause of the gospel in the "times" and "places" just as he planned from all eternity. Whatever was impure in my thoughts and motives in considering that call and any others I have received, declined, or accepted, my Savior has washed in the unending flood that flows from his side.

For all the wisdom he granted me as I compared calls' pros and cons based on information before me, I give him thanks. For all the wise insights shared with me as I listened to brothers and sisters in the faith, I give him thanks. For the awesome privilege as a redeemed jar of clay to have a real part in considering how best to do the work of the church which he bought with his own blood, I give him thanks. And for the assurance that through it all, the decisions reached have been used by him to guide the course of his church and my life to his glory and the salvation of eternal souls, I can only stand in thankful awe before his wondrous grace and mercy. Such is the grace of him who still walks among the lampstands and who still holds the stars in his right hand!

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